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Ambjörnsson, Fannyä; Ganetz, Hillevi

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Culture Unbound
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Introduction: Feminist Cultural Studies

By Fanny Ambjörnsson & Hillevi Ganetz

There is no consensus as to how Cultural Studies is to be defined or delimited. It does not consist of one unified theory but must rather be regarded as an open field that is characteristically manifold. Since the field of Cultural Studies is so open and fluid it has taken varying forms in different parts of the world – Cultural Studies has been globalised. One sign is that a number of Cultural Studies conferences have taken place all over the world, including in Sweden, where the question of what Swedish Cultural Studies is and can be has been discussed.

Feminist perspectives are today well established and integrated in this field, and there is a considerable overlap and mutual interaction between Cultural Studies and Gender Studies. However, the question of what Feminist Cultural Studies is today has remained under-theorised, and there is also a growing need to collect and on a wide front present such work. This is not least the case in the Swedish and Nordic context, where such a broad collection of work in Feminist Cultural Studies has not been published for a long time. To remedy this deficiency we who are the editors of this theme section of *Culture Unbound* issued a call for papers for the European Cultural Studies conference arranged by ACSIS (the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden) in 2011, with the following wording:

> Feminist cultural studies can be defined broadly as gender studies focusing on culture, be it in the anthropological sense of the concept or in the sense of culture as manifested in texts, historical or contemporary, or other cultural products. Like Cultural Studies in general, Feminist Cultural Studies focuses on the production of meaning, both in the practices of everyday life and in texts of different kinds. We welcome papers analysing gendered meaning production, in different texts and contexts. Papers where gender and other intersectional power relations meet are also welcomed.

The call resulted in a session with 19 papers and an idea to produce a theme section in *Culture Unbound*. All contributions published here are written by scholars who after the conference responded to our invitation to participate in a special theme section under the heading ‘Feminist Cultural Studies’.

It has been an intellectual pleasure to edit this theme section, which offers an inspiring sample and overview over recent and current work in this important field. One of the things that struck us when reading the contributions is how central the interplay between text and context is, in all analyses, thus following a historical tradition that has characterised Cultural Studies since its start. Cultural Studies works with ‘texts’, including both lived experience and texts narrowly defined, namely, spoken and written words, images, music and style. The texts’

political, economic and social contexts are at the centre of Cultural Studies' analyses. Cultural Studies shares this interest in context with Gender Studies; it is hard for a gender scholar to stop at close textual analysis as well. It is not the text alone that is the focus of analysis but how society and text are interlinked, plaited together with one another. This is reflected in all contributions to this theme section where the social and political contexts are as important as the analysis of the texts.

This is evident for the first article of this theme section. Anna Lundberg's article is based on an ethnographic participation study of the production of a play staged at one of Sweden's most prominent playhouses for children's and youth theatre: Ung scen/öst. Within the familiar setting of the classroom, the play takes on the challenging task of questioning and scrutinising the complex and tangled situation of contemporary neoliberal ideas and practices, their connections to capitalism and their impact on everyday school-life. This in front of a very young audience who grow up during a period when neoliberal governance has gained increasing influence in Swedish culture and society. Anna Lundberg examines the ways in which the abstract contemporary economic-political manifestations of power and governance are expressed in this play for youth, and how this can be read from a feminist perspective.

Contemporary politics is also thematised in the next article, written within a Danish political context. When Helle Thorning-Schmidt in 2011 became the first female Prime Minister in Denmark, this 'victory for the women' was praised in highly celebratory tones in Danish newspapers. The celebration involved a paradoxical representation of gender as simultaneously irrelevant to politics and – when it comes to femininity – in need of management. Based on an analysis of the newspaper coverage of the elections, Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen argues that highlighting gender (in)equality as either an important political issue or as something that conditions the possibilities of taking up a position as a politician can be interpreted as a performative speech act, i.e. an act that creates the trouble it names. However, ruling out gender equality as irrelevant was continually interrupted by comments on how Thorning-Schmidt and other female politicians perform gender in ways that fit or do not fit with 'doing politician'. These comments tended to concern the styling of bodies and behaviours and followed well known – or sticky – gendered scripts.

Departing from the well-known protest song *Hasta Siempre*, Tiina Rosenberg analyses politics and political investments from a slightly different angle. Rosenberg claims that all cultural representations in the form of songs, pictures, literature, theatre, film, television shows and other media are both deeply emotional and ideological. Feminist scholarship has over the past decade emphasised that affects and emotions are a foundation of human interaction. Furthermore, emotions are embedded as a cultural and social soundtrack of memories and minds. It is from this perspective that Rosenberg's article discusses the unexpected reappearance of the long forgotten song, *Hasta siempre*, as a part of her personal mu-

sical memory. The article develops into a personal reflection on the complex interaction between memory, affect and the genre of protest songs.

Musical discourses are also in focus in Kalle Berggren's intersectional analysis of rap lyrics. Intersectionality has become a highly influential concept in gender research over the last 25 years. In his article, Berggren highlights how debates have focused on differences and power asymmetries between women in terms of race, class, age, sexuality, ability and nation, but more seldom on men. Through analysing a sample of rap lyrics by male artists 1991-2011 Berggren shows how classed discourses can be described in terms of orientation and flow and how racialisation is articulated in terms of place – thus highlighting the role of normative notions of gender and sexuality in anti-racist discourses. He argues that this interconnectedness – class being related to race, which in turn is profoundly gendered – is neither well captured by the prevailing notion of 'masculinities' in gender studies on men, nor by the 'constitution' vs. 'addition' dichotomy in intersectionality debates. Instead, he suggests that *degrees of intersectionality* might be a more fruitful way of theorising intersectionality in relation to men.

Intersectional constructions of masculinity are also at stake in Claudia Lindén's article, focusing on the vampire as a literary figure and cultural icon, often used by women writers to problematise gender, sexuality and power. Departing from the *Twilight* series, Lindén highlights that masculinity is a rarely discussed topic in vampire studies. She argues that the main romantic character in *Twilight*, Edward Cullen, becomes interesting both as a vampire of our time and as a man. In a similar way as in the nineteenth century novel the terms of gender relationship are negotiated and like his namesake Edward Rochester, Edward Cullen has to change in important ways for the 'happy ending' to take place. The article offers an interpretation of Edward as part of a broader field of feminist (re-)uses of the vampire in modern literature with its roots in the literary tradition from Austen and the Brontë sisters as well as from classic Gothic fiction.

In her article Kristina Fjelkestam examines the en-gendering of cultural memory in Honoré de Balzac´s story *Adieu* (1830), which proceeds from a repressed trauma originating from historical events. Balzac wrote the story in the spring of 1830, at a time when the French discontent with the Restoration regime was soon to explode in the July Revolution. The story is considered to claim that the Restoration regime's repression of revolutionary history will have serious consequences in the present. But the question is how the *now* of the Restoration can best be linked to the *then* of the Revolution and the Empire? How can history be represented in a productive way, without silencing traumatic memories? Through relating to pertinent discussions in the interdisciplinary field of cultural memory studies, adding a feminist perspective, Fjelkestam suggests that the abyss between now and then has to be met with an ethically informed respect for difference.

Abortion rights are currently under attack in the Western world. In the US, different states adopt stricter abortion laws, but also in Europe, abortion is constantly

questioned. These issues are at stake in Helena Wahlström's analysis of John Irving's novel *The Cider House Rules*, published as early as 1985. Wahlström states that its discussion of abortion is more relevant than ever. She argues that twenty-first century criticisms of Irving's text, by feminist scholars as well as explicitly anti-feminist pro-life advocates, demonstrate the pervasive influence of anti-abortion discourses, since these readings of Irving's novel include, or reactively respond to, the fetal rights discourse and the 'awfulisation of abortion'. The article further proposes that the novel's representations of reproductive rights issues – abortion in particular – are still relevant today, and that critical readings of fictional and nonfictional representations of reproductive rights issues are central to feminist politics.

In her article, Helena Tolvhed argues for sport as a field of empirical investigation for Feminist Cultural Studies. Sport has, historically, served to legitimise and reinforce the gender dichotomy by making men 'masculine' through developing physical strength and endurance, while women generally have been excluded or directed towards activities fostering a 'feminine suppleness'. But the rigid gender boundaries have also made sport a field of transgressions. In spite of the so called 'corporeal turn' within social theory, sport is still rather neglected within cultural studies and feminist research. This, Tolvhed suggests, appears to be linked to a degradation, and fear, of the body and of the risk that women – once again – be reduced to biology and physical capacity. On the contrary, studies of sport might develop understandings of the processes through which embodied knowledge and subjectivity is produced, in ways that overcome the split between corporeality and discursive regimes and highlight relations between the body and gender.

Constructions of gendered bodies are also central in Magdalena Petersson McIntyre's article, which examines gender and cultural sense-making in relation to perfumes and their packaging. Through the use of go-along interviews with consumers in perfume stores, gendered meanings of seduction, choice, consumption and taste are brought to the fore. While the interviewees' ways of explaining their relationships with packaging on the surface seems to confirm cultural generalizations in relation to gender, Petersson McIntyre argues that letting oneself be seduced is no less active than seducing. Based on a combination of actor network theories and theories of gender performativity, the article points to the agency of packaging for constructions of gender, and understands the interviewees as equally animated by the flows of passion which guide their actions.

Fanny Ambjörnsson is Social Anthropologist and Associate Professor of Gender Studies at the Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies at Stockholm University. Her research interests are within gender, queer theory and youth studies and she is currently working with a project on the question of cleaning within the feminist movement. She has also done research on gender, class and sexuality among adolescent girls, resistance strategies among queer feminist activists and the cultural meanings of the colour pink. E-mail: fanny.ambjornsson@gender.su.se

Hillevi Ganetz is Professor at the Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies at Stockholm University. Her background is in Media and Communication Studies and she is currently working with a project on how science and scientists are represented in the televised Nobel Banquet. She has also been in charge of research projects on gender and popular music and on wildlife films on television. E-mail: hillevi.ganetz@gender.su.se